

Fresh Vegetables

Getting the Most Nutrition For Your Money

By Jenna Anding*

When you buy fresh vegetables you are making an investment, both economically and nutritionally. Fresh vegetables are nutritious because they are great sources of fiber and vitamins A, C and folate. They are naturally low in fat, salt and calories.

According to the U.S.D.A. Food Guide Pyramid, we should eat three to five servings of vegetables each day. A serving is equal to 1 cup of raw leafy vegetables, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of cooked vegetables or $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of vegetable juice.

To get the most nutrition from your food dollar, buy only high quality, fresh vegetables. If you don't like the quality of the fresh vegetables available to you, then consider canned or frozen varieties. Both are nutritious substitutes for fresh vegetables.

Shop Smart!

Buy only the quantity and types of fresh vegetables that can be eaten in a short amount of time unless you plan to preserve them. Throwing away spoiled vegetables is like throwing away money.

Buy fresh vegetables during their usual growing season for the best price and quality.

Visit local farmer's markets and roadside stands. Grocery stores aren't the only place to buy fresh vegetables.

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Be Safe!

Poor storage and preparation of vegetables can cost you money if the vegetables go to waste or cause a foodborne illness. Follow these quality and safety tips to keep your fresh vegetables at their peak.

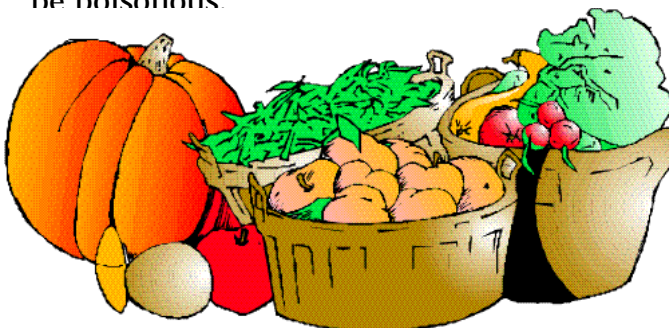
Washing

Wash your hands and counter tops before washing the vegetables to avoid any cross contamination.

Some fresh vegetables can bruise easily, so handle them carefully. Bruises and other blemishes speed up deterioration and allow bacteria to enter the produce.

Use clean, cool, running water to wash the vegetables. Hard vegetables like potatoes and carrots should be cleaned with a vegetable brush to remove any dirt that might be present. Soft vegetables, like lettuce and green beans, should be cleaned under running water by gently rubbing them with your hands.

Never use detergent to clean fresh vegetables. Some detergents have residues that can be poisonous.



If there is a concern about the presence of contaminants on the vegetables, simply peel off the skin. Keep in mind that peeling reduces nutritional value.

Prepackaged, prewashed vegetables like lettuce and baby carrots should be rinsed before they are eaten just in case any contamination occurred during processing or packaging.

If you have a weakened immune system, check with your health care provider about the safety of eating raw fresh vegetables. When in doubt, cook the vegetables to kill any bacteria that may be present.

Preparing

Don't use the same cutting board to cut raw meat and vegetables. Juices from the raw meat could contaminate the fresh vegetables and cause a serious illness.

Storing

Potatoes should be stored in a dark, dry, well-ventilated area between 45 and 50 degrees F. Potatoes stored at room temperature should be used within a week. Store onions at room temperature; onions (not green), garlic and potatoes (including sweet potatoes) should never be stored in the refrigerator.

Asparagus, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, cucumbers, okra, lettuce, peppers and squash should be kept in the vegetable crisper or in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. For best quality, eat asparagus, broccoli and lettuce within 1 to 2 days after purchase. Other vegetables can be stored for 3 to 5 days, although carrots and cabbage can be stored for up to a week.

Eat More!

Having a sandwich for lunch? Try adding lettuce, tomato, onions or shredded carrots to increase your intake of fresh vegetables.

Brighten up that ordinary lettuce and tomato salad by adding carrots, bell peppers, broccoli and cauliflower.

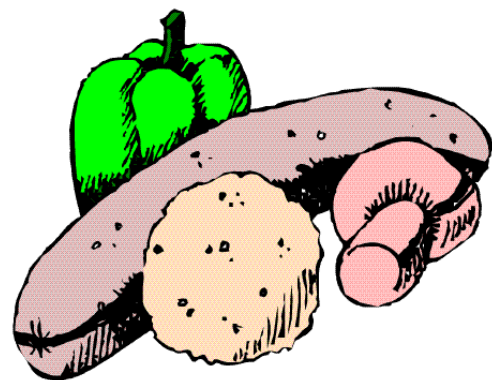
Need a snack? Try some crunchy carrot sticks, broccoli or cauliflower served with low-fat ranch dip for extra flavor.

Microwave or steam fresh vegetables for quick and easy side dishes.








Check the Chart!

The following chart identifies the best times of the year to purchase fresh vegetables. It also lists the key nutrients provided by the vegetables. Key nutrients are listed if a serving provides at least 10 percent of the recommended daily value, based on a 2,000-calorie diet. In addition to the nutrients listed, vegetables have disease-fighting compounds called phytochemicals (fight-o-chemicals).







If your favorite vegetable is not listed, keep eating it anyway. All vegetables are nutritious!



Selecting Vegetables for Availability, Nutritional Value and Quality

Vegetable	Availability	Key Nutrients	Buy	Avoid
Asparagus 	Available all year; peak months are April to July.	Vitamin C and Folate	Look for closed, compact tips; spears should be smooth and round with a rich green color.	Avoid tips that are open and spread out. Avoid spears that are ribbed, or have moldy or decayed tips. Large amounts of sand in the spears may be hard to remove; these spears should be avoided as well.
Beans, Green 	Available all year; peak months in Texas are April to December.	Vitamin C	Beans should have a fresh, bright look with a good color. They should be firm and crisp.	Do not buy wilted or flabby beans or those with signs of decay. Long, thick and tough beans are old.
Broccoli 	Available all year; peak months in Texas are November to April.	Vitamins A and C	Stalks should be a firm, tight cluster of small flower buds that are dark green in color.	Avoid broccoli with open or enlarged buds, or those with a yellowish-green color because these are old.
Carrots 	Available all year; peak months in Texas are August to May.	Vitamin A and Fiber (if peel is eaten)	Carrots should be firm, smooth, well formed and have a good color. Tops of the carrots (if attached) should be fresh with a good green color.	Do not select carrots that have large green areas at the top that must be removed before eating. Avoid carrots that are flabby or wilting.
Cauliflower 	Available all year; peak months are September to January.	Vitamin C	The curd (the part of the vegetable that is eaten) should be creamy white, solid and compact.	Do not buy if the curd is starting to spread out because this is a sign of aging. Do not buy cauliflower that is wilted or has a speckled look caused by decay, mold or injury from insects.
Okra 	Peak season in Texas is July and August.	Vitamin C and Folate	Select tender pods that are bright green and less than 4 1/2 inches long. Tips should bend easily.	Avoid long, tough, stringy pods and/or tips that will not bend. Do not select those with a pale, faded green color.
Peppers, Bell 	Available all year; most plentiful during summer months.	Vitamin C	Common colors are red, yellow, green and orange. Look for those that are firm, have a heavy weight and deep, shiny color.	Peppers that have thin walls or that are wilted should not be picked. Those with soft spots should also be avoided because this can be a sign of decay.

Selecting Vegetables for Availability, Nutritional Value and Quality (continued)

Vegetable	Availability	Key Nutrients	Buy	Avoid
Potatoes 	Available all year long; peak season in Texas is June to September.	Fiber (if skin is eaten), Vitamin C, Pantothenic Acid, Iron, Zinc, Potassium and Magnesium	Select potatoes that are smooth, firm and free from a green color. Note: Do not store in the refrigerator.	Avoid green potatoes and those with large cuts, bruises or decay. Do not buy potatoes that have sprouted or those that are wilted.
Potatoes, Sweet 	Available all year; peak months in Texas are September to January.	Fiber, Vitamins A and C	Look for firm sweet potatoes that have a bright orange skin.	Avoid those with worm holes, cuts or decay. Even if you cut away decayed parts, a bad taste may still be present.
Squash, Summer 	Some types are available all year. In Texas peak season is April to November.	Vitamin C	Look for those that are tender, firm and well developed. Tender squash has a glossy looking skin.	Do not pick summer squash that looks dull and have a hard, tough surface as these will be stale or old. Avoid those with discolored or pitted areas.
Squash, Winter 	Peak season is from early fall until late winter.	Fiber, Vitamins A and C	They should have a hard, tough skin and should be heavy for their size.	Avoid those with cuts, sunken spots or moldy spots. If the skin is tender, the squash is too young and will not have the best taste or quality.
Tomatoes 	Available all year; peak months in Texas are May to December.	Vitamin C	Tomatoes should be smooth, ripe and free from defects. Ripe tomatoes will be slightly soft and have a rich red color. Note: Place unripe tomatoes in a warm area (but not in direct sunlight) to help them ripen.	Do not select tomatoes that are bruised, have cracks or are very soft. Tomatoes that have soft spots, sunken areas or mold are usually decayed and should not be picked.
Turnips 	Available all year.	Fiber, Vitamins A, C and Folate	Select small or medium sized turnips that are firm, smooth and fairly round.	Do not buy large turnips with too many leaf scars around the top.

References and Resources

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Revision